

Breastfeeding Benefits and Resources: What is a galactagogue?¹

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A galactagogue is a food, herb, or medication that helps increase the production of breastmilk. This publication provides some basic information about galactagogues for anyone interested in the topic.

What are galactagogues?

Galactagogues are foods, herbs, or medications that help increase low breastmilk supply. Sadly, there are very few scientific studies on galactagogues, so we do not know much about whether they are safe and effective (Bazzano et al. 2017). If you are experiencing low breastmilk supply or think you may be experiencing low breastmilk supply, please talk to a physician or international board-certified lactation consultant (IBCLC) as soon as possible. This publication cannot replace help from a qualified medical professional, and the sooner you get help for problems with milk supply, the better. Please note that a galactagogue will not boost supply without adequate pumping or nursing.

Foods

Many cultures have traditional foods believed to improve milk production, but few of these foods have been studied to measure their actual impact. For example, Korean mothers traditionally consume brown seaweed soup to boost their milk supply, but there are currently no valid clinical studies that determine for certain if seaweed soup increases milk production (LactMed® 2006c). One

observational study of traditional Thai galactagogue foods found increased breastmilk volume with the consumption of basil, eggs, and a few other foods traditionally believed to boost milk production (Buntuchai et al. 2017). There are also many recipes and ways to purchase “lactation cookies” online; however, a recent study found no change in breastmilk production after the consumption of lactation cookies (Palacios et al. 2023).

Herbs

In addition to foods, many herbs are believed to be galactagogues. For example, Torbangun is an herb thought by the Batakese people to increase milk production (Damanik 2009), and a randomized trial supported this possibility (Damanik et al. 2006). Fenugreek is another herb that can help boost milk production (Khan et al. 2018). While red raspberry leaf is thought to be a galactagogue, there are currently no valid clinical studies focused on raspberry leaf alone to support this (LactMed® 2006b).

An important thing to remember is that herbal supplements can interfere with medications and can have side effects; for example, fenugreek can cause diarrhea and nausea (Ouzir et al. 2016). It is important to talk with your doctor or pharmacist before starting a new herbal supplement and to let them know all the herbal supplements you are taking.

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Medications

There are no drugs approved for use to treat low breastmilk supply in the United States as of the end of 2023 (Cleveland Clinic 2024). One drug, domperidone, is known to produce moderate, short-term increases in milk production (Grzeskowiak et al. 2019). However, domperidone is not approved for use to increase breastmilk production in the United States because of the many side effects associated with the drug, including sudden cardiac arrest (LactMed® 2006a). Other medications that are potential galactagogues include metoclopramide, oxytocin, prolactin, and metformin, but information on how well these drugs work and how safe they are for treating low breastmilk supply is currently minimal (Grzeskowiak et al. 2019).

Summary

Many foods, herbs, and medications are actively researched for their potential as galactagogues. Scientists have a lot more to learn about which of these are safe for mothers and babies and which are effective at increasing milk production. Please talk to your doctor or an international board-certified lactation consultant for the most up-to-date information about which galactagogues you may want to try.

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